

History is Gay  
Episode 46. A Husband is Unnecessary: Yoshiya Nobuko & Japanese Girls'  
Culture

**Leigh:** Hello and welcome to *History is Gay*, a podcast that examines the underappreciated and overlooked queer ladies, gents, and gentle-enbies that have always been there in the unexplored corners of history. Because history has never been as straight as you think.

♪ Intro Music ♪

### Introduction

Hey everyone, it's Leigh. Welcome back to *History is Gay* for another wonderful fun episode. I'm really excited to bring this one to you. I am joined today by a wonderful guest host named Erica Friedman who is the expert on any and everything *yuri* related.

**Erica:** I'm actually the second most expert in the world. [laughter] There's a guy in Japan who is more than me.

**Leigh:** Okay so the- the- the

**Erica:** North American expert.

**Leigh:** The North American, English language expert-

**Erica:** Fair. Fair.

**Leigh:** On *yuri*. So hi, Erica. How are you?

**Erica:** Hello, Leigh, it's such a pleasure to be here. Thank you so much.

**Leigh:** Thank you for being here. It's- it was funny. We- we got connected in a funny way. I had original plans to do this episode like a year and a half ago with a friend who was like, "Hey let's talk about this person. Let's do this thing." And it never ended up manifesting. And he was like. "You know who you should reach out to is this really amazing scholar and all around

amazing knowledgeable person, Erica Friedman.” And then you followed me on Twitter. [laughs]

**Erica:** I did like that same week.

**Leigh:** Yeah and I was like, “oh u” and then you reached out you're like, “I have an episode idea about this really cool person,” and I could not believe the a- the serendipity of the universe.

**Erica:** It really was serendipity right?

**Leigh:** We were having the exact same-

**Erica:** I wrote you and you were like, “Oh my god I was just talking about you like days ago.”

**Leigh:** [laughs] Yeah. So yeah welcome back to the podcast. Today we are going to be diving into the- I mean I think it's appropriate to call it the magical world of Yoshiya Nobuko.

**Erica:** Absolutely.

**Leigh:** Who was a Japanese writer. Who is- essentially people call her the- the grandmother of- of *yuri*- of *shōjo* manga.

**Erica:** That's what- that I have called her the grandmother of *yuri*. Yes, absolutely.

**Leigh:** Yeah.

**Erica:** Absolutely. She was an amazing woman. Her life was honestly amazing. It's- it's one of those lives that you just marvel and the more you learn the more marvelous it becomes.

**Leigh:** Yeah. For those who are listening who are maybe not as steeped in the- the manga world, the anime world, could you explain a little bit about what *yuri* manga is and we're going to go lots of detail into *shōjo* but you

know just like the briefest of introductions for anybody who is very new to this world of literature.

**Erica:** Certainly. I'm just going to real quick pull up my essay here [laughter] because this is what we have on YuriCon because- and the reason I want to start with what we say on YuriCon is because, the thing about *yuri* is as a genre it is one of the newest genres of Japanese pop culture. It is constantly changing for very important reasons, which I'll get to in one second. And it's got different sources so that everybody has different needs and requirements from it. So this is our intentionally broad definition of the genre *yuri* at YuriCon.

*Yuri* can describe any anime or manga series or other derivative media like fanfiction, film, light novels, that show intense emotional connection, romantic love or physical desire between women. *Yuri* is not a genre confined by the gender or age of the audience but by the perception of the audience.

Now just give me a moment here to clarify why that last sentence exists. In Japan, genre is defined by the age and gender of the audience. So you have *shōjo* which is for girls, and *josei* which is for women, and *shonen* which is for boys and *seinen* which is for men. But *yuri* doesn't have that age or gender differentiation so that anybody when- the- it's not a joke when you think it's *yuri*, it's *yuri*. So here's the other half of it...

**Leigh:** [laughs] If I look at it- if I look at it and I think it's gay, it's gay.

**Erica:** It's gay. Right. That's the answer. Right? Even if somebody says you can't say that's gay because blah blah blah well, you know what? Actually I can. Watch. I'm going to. But the other half of that...

**Leigh:** I'm going to rub my filthy little gay hands all over it.

**Erica:** The other half of that is that on my blog *Okazu*, I have a working definition that's slightly different and that is because of the perception issues. So what I say is the difference between *yuri* and LGBTQ+ content is identity. So I always joke that *yuri* is lesbian content without lesbian identity.

Because as soon as I see a series where the characters say, "Well I'm a lesbian and blah blah blah blah" then I go well it's a lesbian media. But if they're like, "I like girls" or "I only like women" or you know "I'm in love with you but I don't know what else I- if I ever liked anybody else ever," you know all these other non-identity things, I call it *yuri*.

But as *yuri* has developed it's getting queerer and queerer and there's a lot more overlap so you can get into arguments about whether we should call girls love, which sort of positions itself as a parallel to the genre boys love-

**Leigh:** Boys love, yeah.

**Erica:** Which is- yeah male/male stuff. It's in a period of intense change right now. Because you have readers who are not queer enjoying it. You have readers who are queer who are creating and enjoying it. And you have publishers who have completely different needs than those other two audiences [laughter] and then you have creators who are doing their own thing with it so these different disparate pressures change it very quickly a lot of the time. So the simple definition is it's not simple but you can just if you think it's *yuri*, it's *yuri*.

**Leigh:** I love that. I love that so much. I mean that's honestly how I approach most of my media, is-

**Erica:** Sure.

**Leigh:** If I feel gayer watching it, it's gay to me. I really enjoy- it's just it's very fun to- to rub your filthy little gay hands all over it.

**Erica:** Yeah, really. [laughter] Well, the thing is if I see it and I resonate with it, and we'll talk about this later too, right? If somebody tells you, "Well you can't identify that is gay because they either didn't use that word or- or the, you know, when-" yeah actually we can because gaydar exists and it exists across time and space and when I look at a picture of Yoshiya Nobuko and her little butchy suit and I think, "gay." Like she's totally gay. Like there's nothing there that doesn't resonate and I don't think that anybody saying, well we can't consider this- this thing because I say so, has any real meaning.

**Leigh:** Right. Yeah. So jumping in, content warnings for this episode there will be like brief discussion of suicide. We're gonna be talking a little bit around World War II and Japan's imperialist actions during that time. We'll put all those in the show notes so if- if you need to skip around the episode you can look down there for those.

This is gonna be a people focused episode. We're gonna be talking about our social context and then dive into the world and life of Yoshiya Nobuko and all the various elements of her queerness and queerness in the world around her. And, as usual, we'll end the podcast with how gay were they? Our personal ranking about how likely it is that they weren't straight, which is always fun

### **Socio-Historical Context**

All right, so let's dive in. I'm gonna give us a little bit of context for where we're dropping into the life of Yoshiya Nobuko. She was born at a time when literally everything in Japan was changing an insane amount, so early 20th century Japan. We've talked about Tokugawa period before in previous episodes. We get to 20th century Japan and everything changes really rapidly. Japan broke its 200 years of isolation and opened up trade ports, basically some motherfucker named Commodore Perry, some American dude is like, "Hey I'm here open up your ports and trade with me or-"

**Erica:** On my terms.

**Leigh:** Yeah, on my terms.

**Erica:** Because I got the bigger ships. Because I got the big ships.

**Leigh:** I've got big ships, I've got big guns, fuck you. Say it with me-

♪ Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck Fuck colonialism! ♪

**Erica:** But I want to say that that the Russians and the French and the Italians and the British were all- the Portuguese and the British were all just hovering-

**Leigh:** Yes. Yeah.

**Erica:** Also. It's just that America got there first but somebody else would have done it.

**Leigh:** Right yeah. So you have this- this period of like 200 years of Japan being very insular, having very closed borders and closed culture society, and then suddenly Westerners are like flooding in.

**Erica:** And Japan embraced it because they- they saw what happened to China. during the British occupation and went hmm, you know what we could do? We could modernize right now. We are going to embrace this international economic stage. And I think this is an important thing because a lot of people write about it, saying, "Well you know when their doors were forced open," and sure the door might have been forced open, but then they were like, "You know what? We're doing this."

**Leigh:** And we- the doors open.

**Erica:** The doors open. We're doing this. And that's why everything was changing so rapidly because they were embracing Western technology and science and medicine and absorbing it and integrating it as quickly as possible. But also sending their own people out to Western schools, to England and to the U.S. and sending people to come back with Western ideas of technology and travel and- and all this other stuff so and they really mobilized quickly [snaps fingers] and moved unbelievably quickly.

**Leigh:** Yeah I mean I don't think- it's an insane amount of change in an insane amount of time. You had people, you know, who were like, "Also you know fuck this *shogunate*. [laughter] I'm done. I'm done with this." And so you have 1867 Emperor Meiji comes to power, basically says, "Goodbye *shoguns*, the Imperial family is now in charge again."

**Erica:** Which was a civil war and we don't- they don't talk about it like a civil war when you're looking at it, there was a civil war.

**Leigh:** Right. Yeah. And so you literally have this period, less than 20 years, cause Emperor Meiji dies in 1912 and you get a new emperor. So now you have this- this *Taishō* period. So we're working in this conversation here we're like itty bitty bit in Meiji period and then *Taishō* and everything in the period of like you know late 1800s to 1900, everything had modernized and like you were saying. Western literature was everywhere. Scientific methodology was everywhere. All the work of the sexologists in- in the Western world coming over to Japan which we will talk about in detail a little bit later.

**Erica:** Things like *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Little Princess* all these- all these bits of Victorian literature that show up and just really make such an impact.

**Leigh:** Even though Japan is like modernizing, Confucian values still kind of hold really strong, especially in ways that Japanese officials were like, "All right here's our roles for men and women." Imagine like Confucian [laughs] gender roles and Victorian gender roles smushing together.

**Erica:** Smushing together. Yeah.

**Leigh:** That's kind of what you get. I mean, it's not the greatest.

**Erica:** And it's really just sexism is- let's- let's be honest. So sexism still ruled and they got a little bit more sexist.

**Leigh:** Yeah, yeah. You've got the- the Civil Code of 1898 basically established this like new family system and it was you know, "Hey the household is really important, individuality not so much" and "women be domestic, women being kitchen, woman hang out in the house." Do you want to talk a little bit about *ryosai kenbo*?

**Erica:** No I think you're doing really good. I'm gonna-

**Leigh:** Okay.

**Erica:** I mean, I mean, sure- the thing is I don't want to- if I talk about *ryosai kenbo* which is good wife, wise mother, I'm not gonna be kind about

it. Right? [laughter] So the fact is that- that about this time there was a state- there was a official state policy in the late 1800s and early 1900s, that established this concept of the good wife, wise mother, which has I don't know- what's the name of that insect that takes over ants- of the fungus that takes over ants' bodies and-

**Leigh:** Oh yeah.

**Erica:** It's a lot like that. This is how I feel about it. Like this- this ideal of- of women being completely self sacrificial for their children, their male children, and their husbands endlessly. And being supportive of the state as another male partnership, really. You know the patriarchal state is also watching over you. And at the at the risk of women's lives at the at the- the sacrifice- the full sacrifice of women's lives. I don't think it's a policy that offered any particularly positive qualities, if you're a woman. And yet we still see relics of it floating through modern thought in Japanese policy making.

**Leigh:** And it was hugely influential in terms of the way that we are gonna be discussing, the ways that women were just navigating the world.

**Erica:** Yes. And the choices they were given.

**Leigh:** And the choices they were given and the choices they made.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Leigh:** Yeah.

**Erica:** Choices they made as opposed to the choices they- they were actually not given. And I think in a lot of ways, in the way Yoshiya Nobuko saw what she needed to be doing, you know? That there's- there's this ideal and she had this idea of- a different ideal of what women could be capable of.

**Leigh:** Well she was not the only one. Right?

**Erica:** Right.



**Leigh:** So you have- this is a time where we have a lot of feminism really cropping up especially in this group called the Bluestockings Group or Seitôsha. So it basically started with a journal, a magazine, called *Seito*.

**Erica:** And Bluestockings was based on a group of the same name here in the West.

**Leigh:** Oh okay. I didn't know that.

**Erica:** There was a- and the thing that I think is so important is-

**Leigh:** Tell me more.

**Erica:** This is the thing-

**Leigh:** Tell me about the bluestocking

**Erica:** Well I don't really know a lot about the western bluestockings other than that they exist. But here's the important point, I think- when we talk about this is feminist thought, and it is feminist thought, what I want to say is that it's feminist thought that is rooted in literary concepts. It's women creating things for themselves and above all making sure their own voices and their own stories are being heard.

So when, in Japan, they created Bluestockings it was primarily- it was primarily a literary journal. You know with women writing things and creating stuff for themselves to have their own voices being heard. And I think that theme will come up over and over and over as we go through her life, is this idea of every generation finding a new way to say hey our voices aren't being heard, they need to be heard.

And then of course the new laws that always sort of go "Oh yeah so we'll listen to you later but then right now we're going to listen to only men." You know, kind of thing. [agreeing noises] So it's- it's a very interesting thing where it's- it's really a literary proto-feminism, let's call it that.

**Leigh:** Yeah so it's started by Hiratsuka Raicho in 1911 and it's- it has tons of women's writing and it's also translating a lot of things coming over and influencing proto-Japanese feminist thought.

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** You've got things like Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* was really popular. A lot of these- these

**Erica:** Super surprising, really.

**Leigh:** Women who were indoctrinated in good wife wise mother were really, really excited by this story of this Scandinavian housewife going, "No, fuck you I leave."

**Erica:** "I'm leaving. I'm walking away."

**Leigh:** "You- you take care of the children. I'm running away." If you haven't read *A Doll's House*, honestly you should.

**Erica:** Honestly, you should. Yes.

**Leigh:** If you want to see a Victorian fuck you to Victorian gender roles. Nora in- there's a reason why it's so influential everywhere in the world. I'm a theater nerd, it's great. They also like published sexological texts and this will become really important when we talk about queerness, is that like- this is- this was one of the first places that a lot of Japanese women were reading about sexological texts on women/women relationships.

**Erica:** Or women's desire at all.

**Leigh:** Or women's desire in general.

**Erica:** That surprising idea that women also have sexual desire. "Oh my god what do we do with it?"

**Leigh:** What?!

**Erica:** "How do we stop this?" You know.

**Leigh:** [sarcasm] We've never encountered that in this-

**Erica:** [sarcasm] Never ever.

**Leigh:** [sarcasm] podcast ever. So it was- it was not very long lived. It was basically from 1911 to 1916. But there's this really great quote in Raicho's like manifesto when creating the journal that was:

*"This is the first cry of the Bluestockings! We are the mind and the hand of the woman of new Japan"*

**Erica:** That's lovely.

**Leigh:** So it's- that's the way to kind of take it in is- is you've got this group of women who were like all right time to write about ourselves. And in addition to you know women, grown-ass women, you have this rise of girls' schools and with it, girls' culture. So with the Meiji restoration, with the Civil Code, with- with all this rapid industrialization that's happening, you have one of the things that came about is compulsory education.

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** So you had all of these kids required-

**Erica:** The creation of adolescence.

**Leigh:** Yes. Yeah. So you have this- and it, you know, it was- it was influenced in some ways by like American girls' culture which was in the zeitgeist and basically crossed over to Japan and they created their own version of the phenomenon. It started out as like an imitation, and developed its own uniquely Japanese version, which we call *shōjo bunka*, which is girls' culture.

**Erica:** But also there's a- there's another thing that's happening there because, as I said, when Japan opened its doors, started sending people out to other countries and other cultures to learn, one of the things it wanted to

do was kind of understand what they were doing in things like, what does education look like in America? What does education look like in Britain? In France? And to assist with that, they brought in experts from those countries. And so a lot of these schools that were created were run, particularly for the upper middle class, were run by Western religious affiliations. And that took on very specific forms.

And so not only was the girls' culture created based on you know the idea that now now we are all a bunch of young women in one place, which creates a whole lot of pressures and interesting situations but also this idea that you know there's an acknowledgement by the- by the powers that be that sexuality is is happening. Adolescence is happening. And how do we stop it, is also a very important thing.

You know how do we make sure that these girls don't run out and get pregnant or you know do other things and when you combine that with the the *kohai/sempai* system that- that is existing in schools in Japan, and now in businesses as well, you get this idea of you know older girls taking younger girls under their wing and show them how the school works and give them you know allies and some a confidant. And that begins to morph into what we think of as girls culture and then [laughter] you have girls magazines giving a focus for that.

And the thing about the girls magazines is that they seem like they're really organic, right? Because girls are writing the magazines and telling them stories. But it's not. It's a bunch of guys who said you know we should do? We should we should try to sell stuff to girls. So they would write stories and they'd write fake letters to each other like oh you know I was at school and I saw this older student and she was so beautiful, right?

And so then real girls were like, "Oh my god me too!" [laughter] And then they started writing in these really passionate letters to each other and saying you know, "My- my *onee-sama*, my older sister, is the most beautiful woman and when she stands there and you know she- and looks she is so-so elegant," and these incredibly passionate, romantic letters to each other and then they started writing stories. And so while the men were the initial editors, the content started coming from the girls and young women who were reading the magazines and among them was Yoshiya Nobuko.

**Leigh:** Yes. I know you're like you're skipping- you're skipping so far ahead!

**Erica:** Oh I'm sorry, sorry, sorry. Sorry.

**Leigh:** [laughs] You're giving away the good- you're giving away the good stuff too early. Yeah. Yeah. You have this- this emergence of these magazines, basically the the creation of young girl as consumer-

**Erica:** As consumer. As soon as possible, let's get back going. This is [unintelligible].

**Leigh:** Yeah I think we- I think we like really kind of skimmed over it there. But you have this creation of this like liminal adolescent identity. So we're gonna be bringing up this word *shōjo* throughout the whole episode and it means- you know literally like transliterated it's like "maiden" or "girl."

**Erica:** Well there's two different words, let's be very clear. *Shōjo* which, with a longer O, *shōjo* is girl. *Shojo* with a short O is maiden or a virgin.

**Leigh:** Okay.

**Erica:** So it's- it's not the same word.

**Leigh:** But basically you know, not yet a woman.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Leigh:** Hasn't married, hasn't had children. You haven't entered into the realm of adult reality and responsibilities.

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** And with that heterosexuality. Before this time, adolescence wasn't really a thing in Japan. And one of-

**Erica:** Or anywhere, really.

**Leigh:** And this- this *shōjo* period, this adolescence gives like a middle ground between puberty and marriage and we see it this time, it keeps extending as more women join the workforce. So it could you know include not just girls who were like actively in these girl schools but also women who were just unmarried, or women with privilege to not have to financially depend on good wife, wise mother to survive.

And you mentioned before there's an important class component here. Is that these girl schools were primarily made up of upper middle class girls, so you know *shōjo bunka* was kind of like more of a leisure class thing. You see it in some other areas but we- we read- I read in a couple of sources that like working class, lower class girls, factory workers often didn't recognize themselves as *shōjo*.

**Erica:** As *shōjo*. But they had the magazines so that they could fantasize about it and that's really important as well. These girls magazines did commoditize girls but also gave them a place for them to express themselves. And so, while yes, of course *shōjo*- as with pretty much any kind of culture, *shōjo bunka* started with more well off, more stable privileged girls, the magazines gave a chance for other girls to be part of that world, even if it was only while they were reading it.

**Leigh:** Yeah. And there's a really great quote from one of the sources we read, we'll we'll link into the show notes, that basically this- this space of girls' culture,

*"The space of Shōjo bunka was an independent community for girls, free from intrusion by male educational codes or standards"*

So you have this- this emergence of this space that is theirs.

**Erica:** It's theirs.

**Leigh:** And this space in these magazines that is theirs, extends out into the schools themselves and the entire subculture that kind of erupts from all of this.

**Erica:** Absolutely.

**Leigh:** These- these girls-

**Erica:** And that's very typical of girls in every generation. Every generation, young girls make their own culture. It eventually gets appropriated by the larger- the culture at large and then everyone worries about the girls, because oh my god they're- you know they're wearing makeup or they're doing whatever. They're hanging out in Shibuya and drinking tapioca- tapioca tea or whatever but- but and every generation does exactly the same thing. Like the girls create the culture, the culture is appropriated, and then we- then we start sort of diminishing the girls experience with it. You know? Every single time over and over and over.

**Leigh:** And the- the nature of the stories that are in these- these girls' magazines is- girl stories were usually like dreamy and fantasy. And these boys' stories were adventure stories and kind of more nationalistic messages. And the girl stories were nationalistic in a different way.

**Erica:** In a different way.

**Leigh:** You know, let's- let's not sugar coat that. But it's- it's- you have this kind of like this liminal space of adolescence.

**Erica:** And it's a place for to fantasize about love without necessarily being involved in romance with boys. You know? Because a lot of these girls, I mean let's be honest, some of them you know if you didn't have a brother at home, you didn't see boys you know in these schools and in your homes. And you had this place where you could say I want to be a woman like my *onee-sama*.

### **Who Were They? Bio Time**

**Leigh:** Well speaking of young Japanese girls looking at someone they would like to be like, looking up to as a role model, let's dive in to Yoshiya Nobuko, herself.

**Erica:** Excellent.

**Leigh:** So she was born January 12th, 1896. This is the year after the end of the Sino-Japanese War. And her parents were a police official who then becomes like a government official father. Her mother was a housewife. They're pretty conservative. She's born in Niigata prefecture. And both of her parents came from samurai families. So they- they're pretty comfortable. They're in this nice-

**Erica:** They are the establishment.

**Leigh:** Financial position. They are the establishment. And the household kind of held on to these earlier feudal ideals. So she's the only girl among four brothers, basically only girl in the family, a lot of pressure. Mom tries to drill into her this *ryosai kenbo* ideals. You know? She teaches her how to sew and cook and she really loved to read but mom is like, "Nope you're gonna read these books on how to sew and cook, instead of like, novels." And she says that she was really influenced by the girls magazines because her brothers had the boys magazines. There's a really lovely quote from her she says:

*"I was so happy because my older brothers had a subscription to a magazine called Shonen Sekai (which is Boy's World), and I would have to steal it to read whenever they left it unread on a desk. I remember being so happy when I could finally read the girls' version and have it all to myself."*

And she describes like- like she- she like held it so tightly and caressed it with her fingers and she- she saw the stack of the magazines grow on her desk and she was so satisfied by it. So these really held a lot of importance to her, growing up.

**Erica:** Yeah, absolutely. Right. But again it immediately gave her her own space. One that she didn't have to share with any of her brothers but also one that she could be really deeply embedded in. And so, as I said, she was first published when she was only 12 years old. So she's writing stories in 1908, sending them in to magazines. And so she sent some reader submission to girls magazine *Shōjo Sekai*, which is Girls' World. As well as *Shōjo no Tomo*. *Shōjo no Tomo* just existed for a really long time and you'll see a lot



of influential writers in the mid-20th century and *Shōjokai* which is Girls Realm.

And from there was- she was writing reader submissions and actually wrote for a literary magazine by 17 years old. And she actually won first place in a girl's fiction contest sponsored by literary magazine, *Girls' World*.

**Leigh:** Yeah. She you know, she moved really quickly from like submitting amateur "amateur"

quote unquote reader submissions to like really wanting to pursue, "I'm gonna be publishing these literary magazines I'm gonna be a writer."

**Erica:** That was- she was absolutely you know committed to it. This was not like a, "Well, you know I'll be singer, no I'll be a writer, no I'll be an actress. "You know? This was like, "I'm gonna be a writer."

**Leigh:** Yeah. So she- basically her father gets transferred to a different post and she's like, "I don't want to go live out in the country. I don't want to be stuck in my parents house with all of these rules." So she moves to Tokyo in 1915 to live with her youngest brother Tadaki. Who basically, he's like the one family member who actually supported her. Right? And he was-

**Erica:** Yeah. He got her. He got her, really.

**Leigh:** He got her.

**Ercia:** He definitely got her.

**Leigh:** Yep. He's friends with this pretty prolific artist, Takehisa Yumeji. And basically Yumeji sends a letter to Yoshiya Nobuko is like hey I hear you're doing all this cool writing and I do cool art, let's get together and do some sort of collaboration. And so you know-

**Erica:** And she- that was really cool because he was really a super influential artist and even now the Yayoi-Yumeji museum which is two artists, Yumeji and his friend Yayoi, their houses were next to each other, they've turned both houses into a museum, have a ton of Yoshiya Nobuko stuff. But the

thing is, Yumeji himself kind of annoyed Noboku [laughter] she- she didn't really like the way he ran his life. You know he was having affairs with other women, not you know, and sort of ignoring his wife but she thought well he's a means to an end, so sure we'll-

**Leigh:** This is my chance!

**Erica:** So sure, we'll collaborate. Absolutely.

**Leigh:** Yoshiya Nobuko is Alexander Hamilton, not throwing away my shot. [laughs]

**Erica:** Yep.

**Leigh:** Yeah. So during her first year in Tokyo, she begins writing this series of stories, *Hana Monogatari* or *Flower Tales*. She submits it to Shōjo Gabō in 1916 and it runs for the next eight years. And this is the thing that propelled her into fame. She serializes it- this story through 1924, so it's something she's working on you know for quite some time. This series of stories is, basically these 52 stories all named after flowers. So I can only imagine [giggles] what the flowers were by the end of that you know?

**Erica:** Yeah, you know, they're all pretty standard but it's- it's um they're very much about girls in that liminal space. And they are very, very much. And they start really interestingly because they start with a group of older women, like middle-aged women, talking. Saying "Oh, I remember when I was in school let me tell you a story." So there's like a framing quality [agreeing noises] about a two-thirds of the way, that disappears and it's just one story after another story [slapping hands] so the framing story sort of falls apart, and then it's just these stories.

And they are- it's like a lot of realism, it's a lot of harshness. It's a lot of death and loss. And you feel them. I mean you feel every one of these stories in a very real way that you might not feel if you're just reading stories about school life, that liminal life.

**Leigh:** Right. Yeah. So this- this is really, really influential and we're gonna return back to it because it is- it's absolutely genre-defining.

**Erica:** It is.

**Leigh:** So she starts this, she- she lives with her brother for a little while. Her brother gets a job in north China for I think- I think he did something with trees. I can't remember.

**Erica:** Yeah, something agricultural.

**Leigh:** But, basically he's like, "All right I gotta go to north China" and she's like, "Well cool, um I'm gonna stay in Tokyo, I'm not moving back in with mom and dad." And so she moves to this women's dorm in Yotsuya district, which is basically it's- it's like run by American Baptist missionaries and that's where she starts learning English. She does not stay there for very long because apparently she really liked going to-

**Erica:** The movies!

**Leigh:** Going to the movies.

**Erica:** Going out.

**Leigh:** And staying out late.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Leigh:** Hanging out with people.

**Erica:** She kept missing her curfew.

**Leigh:** Yeah yeah. They had a really strict curfew so she's like well, I don't like this anymore. So she- she moves to the YWCA. So you know women's equivalent to the YMCA in Kanda district. And- and there she meets Kikuchie Yukie, who is her roommate. Which if that's pinging some things for you, hold tight.

**Erica:** Roommate. [laughs]

**Leigh:** Hold tight. She basically- this- this girl becomes a model for honestly a couple of different characters.

**Erica:** In her work yeah. Absolutely.

**Leigh:** In a couple of different stories.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Leigh:** She also, it was important to note that Yoshiya was- was a reader of that *Seito* magazine.

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** And that we talked about earlier. And that she did like actually attend a few meetings of the Bluestockings.

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** She publishes in 1919 one of her other really seminal texts.

**Erica:** So that she published *Yaneura no Nishojo* which is *Two Maidens in the Attic*. It was a book that I and other scholars consider the prototype of the first- of *yuri*. Where you have two young women in a fraught situation, a very emotional situation, in a- in a girl school and they are put in an attic room, apart from everyone else. And that room becomes a focal point for the development of, not only just the relationship but of the main character's whole personality.

And she comes to the Akiko who is the protagonist comes to the YWCA and- or the YCA- and she is so reticent that it literally takes her, and I joke about this all the time, she literally takes three pages to open a door in the beginning of the book. [laughter] And at the end of the book when Akitsu turns to her and says, "*Come with me to the outside world*" and it's Dollase talks about that as as a social and political awakening but there's other stuff

going on there too because there's a very physical and very emotional relationship between them.

That whole story is like watching Akiko develop deeply. And the fact that she was apart from everybody at first is a real problem but then it becomes a refuge even as she becomes more capable of building relationships with the people around her and understanding who she is as a person. So it gives her refuge from the turmoil within and then gives her the strength to be able to walk away with Akitsu, in a way that is a choice. And an act of choice by the both of them to say we're not going to go do the things that we're being required to do.

**Leigh:** Mm-hmm.

**Erica:** It was a great book.

**Leigh:** I wish more of her stuff was translated.

**Erica:** Yeah. Well you know I- we haven't mentioned her yet but I think I'm just gonna run in right now. A lot of what we're really waiting for right now is the book by Sarah Frederick. Dr. Sarah Frederick is a assistant professor over at Boston University. She's a friend of mine and I did a video with her about Yoshiya Nobuko and which will have in the comments- in the show notes. She is hoping to do a biography of her soon and she's trying very hard to get more of her work in English. And of course I'm raw-rawing that because [laughs] I would like to see-

**Leigh:** Absolutely.

**Erica:** All of her work in English.

**Leigh:** Yeah, this is a really interesting person that we're- we're covering because I think you said this when we were talking is like we know a lot about her without really knowing a lot about her.

**Erica:** That is exactly it.

**Leigh:** It's- we have hearsay. We have things that have been translated and then passed down and things that have been kind of repeated in the same articles etc. but there hasn't been a big comprehensive, at least English language-

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** Look into her life. There's a Japanese one.

**Erica:** There is one- there is one in Japanese but there is not one in English.

**Leigh:** Exactly.

**Erica:** And so I'm really hoping that Sarah can- can get that out in the next couple of years.

**Leigh:** Right.

**Erica:** And so we'll have like the book. The big book of Yoshiya Nobuko. You know.

**Leigh:** So one limitation I'll say for our research is that you know we are dealing with translations. We are dealing with, you know-

**Erica:** Interpretation.

**Leigh:** Interpretation and English language sources. So there's a level of disconnect there that we're not you know getting things in the original Japanese.

**Erica:** And even if we do, we're getting things that are still interpretations and then there's the whole issue and I, I'm sorry I'm jumping a little bit but the issue that she was often diminished as an author by contemporary critics, need I say contemporary male critics?

**Leigh:** Yep.

**Erica:** Who did not recognize that popular fiction, you know there's that- we get it here in America too that popular fiction versus literary fiction thing. And if it's not literary fiction, [sarcasm] amazingly no woman has ever written a literary fiction. It's like weird right? It's like the bizarre- like no women write literary fiction. We only write genre fiction but men write literary fiction. And that's the same thing that happened to her.

**Leigh:** Which is so funny because literally at this time right? Like around *Two Maidens* or *Two Virgins in the Attic*, she's describing the work, she's writing it this time. She's- she's trying to go for a little bit of an older audience she starts describing this as part of the quote unquote "pure literature genre." This-

**Erica:** Junbungaku. Yeah.

**Leigh:** Yeah. And you have this dichotomy between like sugary and like domestic and girls literature and like [serious tone] the pure literature. She-

**Erica:** You know the difference is like, and you can see it in her writing, when you talk about pure literature, you're talking about things that are socially and politically aware. They're set in our world. They're set in reality and *Hana Monogatari* is a huge move towards that. And most of the stories, even the ones that are set in the girls' school, is they shift at the end.

Like, and then the real world comes into- you know, stumps down this beautiful relationship or this charming young lady, and sets her into the real world. And I think that that's what *Hana Monogatari* does as such a- a generational change. It's like, yes, it's liminal but at some point you have to leave the liminality and then when you get to the real world this is what it looks like.

**Leigh:** Right. Yeah. She also wrote a couple of other things right in this- this year, in 1919, that really became hits and and kind of made her like commercially successful novelist. Which- this woman ended up rich!

**Erica:** Really rich.

**Leigh:** Really wealthy.

**Erica:** Really, really rich.

**Leigh:** Really well off. There was a point at which I think she- I think I read that she was like making three times as much as the prime minister.

**Erica:** Yes, that is correct.

**Leigh:** Which is crazy. She- basically in 1921, cuts her hair to this like short haircut. It's really-

**Erica:** It's very boyish.

**Leigh:** It's very boyish. It's- I mean it's like- it's like an elevated bowl cut, basically.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Leigh:** It's a *kappa*.

**Erica:** But it was cute on her. She looked adorable.

**Leigh:** Yeah it's very cute. She's like one of the first women to do this even though it was banned by Japanese law.

**Erica:** Technically against the law. Yeah.

**Leigh:** Not really enforced but you know whatever. And she has this same hair for the rest of her life and she never went back to longer styles. And it is at this point that she starts also dressing in more masculine clothing and she's really starting to develop this like butchy appearance.

**Erica:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Leigh:** Which is just really lovely. And she- she's in a series of romantic relationships with other women as early as 1918. We'll talk about those soon. And while she was like never secretive about it, she was always very open about it, the physical aspects, you know women's sexual desire, not



really something that you talked about. And so you know we learn about these aspects of her life not necessarily through her writing either, because a lot of it is very chaste, we learn about these things from like private letters.

**Erica:** Private letters

**Leigh:** Of which there are a lot.

**Erica:** Yeah, the private letters were much steamier. Yeah.

**Leigh:** A lot. Yes. Namely, many of her letters are from and to, this woman Monma Chiyo who is the greatest love of her life.

**Erica:** Yes.

**Leigh:** They meet in January 1923. She's three years older than Monma. She's 27 at this time, Monma's 24. They get introduced by a friend and they begin living together in 1926. And passionately in love. We're gonna talk more about them in their whole- whole section.

**Erica:** Yes.

**Leigh:** But she basically meets this person and the entire rest of her life is involved with this person.

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** Do you want to talk about *Black Rose* a little bit?

**Erica:** So in 1925 she founded her own literary magazine. And I wanted to say that again because once again we're talking about this proto-feminist idea of using literary effort to discuss identity and- and social aspects and political pieces. Because these literary magazines, which still exist and can I just do a quick digression?

There's a whole gigantic culture in Japan of what's called *doujinshi*. And *doujinshi* are coterie magazines. They are groups of people called circles. And you get together and for at least a while you work on this magazine so

*doujinshi* don't necessarily exist for very long but they are exactly like if you were ever the member of the church group and you joined the newsletter and then you were the editor for the newsletter for a couple of years, then you walked away and then that newsletter dies, and then maybe a couple of years later somebody else brings it back that's very much what *doujinshi* look like.

So this culture is already established back in the early 20th century with these ideas, these groups of like-minded people getting together and doing newsletters or magazines. So she mostly was running *Black Rose* by herself and- and every other editor who's ever done that, [laughs] and I am one of them. She only lasted eight issues. [laughs] Because you're just doing too much. So that was dissolved.

**Leigh:** So Monma and Yoshiya, they build a new house in a Tokyo suburb in 1926, for them to basically move in and live together. This is the first of eight houses that Yoshiya built.

**Erica:** Eight houses. Right?

**Leigh:** I mean and we say "built" but you know she paid people who build them, but she-

**Erica:** But- but this is unheard of.

**Leigh:** Yeah she's like cool I want a house let's make one over here. She's one of the first Japanese women to have a privately owned car. She owns six racehorses. She was making more money than the prime minister. She loved golf.

**Erica:** Traveled the world, several times.

**Leigh:** Traveled the world. Very, very well off successful woman. They shared a house with two maids and a German Shepherd and I wish that I knew what that doggy's name was.

**Erica:** Yeah I've never seen the name.

**Leigh:** Yeah. At this time she starts writing stories aimed a little bit more at like housewives and an adult audience. Basically she's taking the audience that started with her-

**Erica:** With her, *Hana Monogatari*.

**Leigh:** *Hana Monogatari*, and is becoming older and she's like, "Ah well here you go." You know like like some you know how some people like kind of grew up with different stories is this is what's happening.

**Erica:** And that's actually happening- you're seeing- I'm seeing that now in the *yuri* genre as well. Because when people who started with Sailor Moon, back in the 90s, they became *yuri mangaka* and like the 2000s and 2010s, and now they're getting to be middle aged and they're writing stories about older women and you're starting to see some stories about seniors popping up and it's like well duh! Right? Cause- cause-

**Leigh:** I'm gonna follow this author.

**Erica:** Oh, and also you as an- as a creator you don't want to keep writing about 15 year olds for the rest of your life

**Leigh:** [laughs] Right.

**Erica:** You know at some point it doesn't feel right to you. It doesn't feel valid and- and you have to move yourself forward and your characters have to move forward and you need to talk about things that are more important to people more like you.

**Leigh:** 1927, 1928s, they basically spend like a whole year traveling West. Going all over Europe. They stayed in Paris for a long time, visited the U.S. Yoshiya really wanted to go to Russia because like that's where revolution happened. And while they're there, they rendezvous with two other women, Japanese writers who were very gay together. [laughter] And like these two women become another really important part of like Japanese feminist literary canon. We don't have time to go into them but basically just gal paling around with them in Moscow.

**Erica:** As one does.

**Leigh:** As one does. Having a wonderful time and then...World War II.

### **41:36 - 43:42 Content Note: discussion of WWII**

**Erica:** Right. And prior to World War II.

**Leigh:** And prior to World War II.

**Erica:** So Yoshiya Nobuku became part of what's known as the *Pen Butai*, the Pen Corps. A journalistic propaganda unit who- she was a quote unquote "special correspondent" for *Shufu no Tomo, Housewife's Friend*, and she was writing from China and specifically Manchuria and some Indonesian, Thailand, Vietnam and other areas that were occupied by Japan. And it's very important to note that she wasn't the only feminist writer to support the military regime but there weren't a lot of options. Also, very likely, she saw this as a chance to be more respected as a writer, to- to lift herself up into a higher echelon of the only woman among a much more special group of men.

**Leigh:** Right.

**Erica:** So it's very possible that was the case. And she did- she absolutely wrote imperialistic propaganda. There's no question she upheld state directives, and she definitely also made up a story in her head about like this was a way for Japanese women and Chinese women to reach out to each other and somehow you know make a connection even though clearly that was not going to be a thing that would be allowable by imperialistic society.

**Leigh:** Yeah. And a lot of this stuff at this time is- the government was like not quite sure about having her be part of the Pen Corps, in some ways they're like, "I don't know if all of your feminist messaging is what we need right now but you're also like really popular. So..."

**Erica:** She was really popular.

**Leigh:** "Let's have you- let's have you write a play for- basically let's have you do USO shows and you know be our very popular girls writing mascot to get all of the housewives really supporting the military."

**Erica:** Nationalistic fervor.

**Leigh:** Nationalistic. Exactly.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Leigh:** Yeah. And you know there's- there's- we'll put in the show notes like there's plenty of really great articles bringing up this complexity in her supporting these messages and some of the pushback from writers at the time, as well. Who were some of the people who kind of did stay a little bit on the more critical side. It was really hard in Japan at the time to not be-

**Erica:** Write something that the censors didn't agree with, you know.

**Leigh:** Yeah. Exactly.

**Erica:** And she was also serializing novels in the newspaper as well as the propaganda that she was writing. She was- as you said she'd moved towards more domestic, *katei*, domestic is sort of like you know two housewives. You'll still hear like-

**Leigh:** Two housewives, one house.

**Erica:** Two housewives. It's things- things to do- two housewives like *Katei ryōri* is like domestic cooking as opposed to like cooking in a restaurant or whatever. She started taking on historical novels. And one of the things she was doing at the time- and she was serializing these in newspapers. And I want to really keep beating that point to death because newspapers were an incredibly popular way of distribution of information and therefore- and entertainment- and so imagine if- pretty much every adult in Japan is reading the newspaper and that newspaper includes a story centering women's experiences.

So these became so incredibly popular, this is what was- it like you know they put these stories in there and people were like ew what's this? People were like eating it up. So in 1939 she had a story called *The Women's Classroom*, it was 212 serialized chapters-

**Leigh:** Jesus Christ.

**Erica:** In two major newspapers. I mean that's not something that- that's being ignored right? That's men and women reading and going, "Wow! When's the next chapter?" There was a novel edition. It had two stage plays and had two films made of it. In 1946, now we're jumping a bit post-war, *The Ataka Family* which was a novel of hers that was also serialized, sold five million copies. And she was the highest ranked women writer in a poll in the *Mainichi Shimbun*, which is the the daily paper, of who is your favorite writer after the incredibly world famous, Natsume Sōseki.

So Sōseki is so famous that he is even translated into English. Like *I am a Cat* is a thing that people know here. So it's a hugely popular writer and she was number two.

**Leigh:** Wow.

**Erica:** So I mean this was a woman who really had her work being seen by nearly everyone, nearly every adult in Japan at this point.

**Leigh:** Amazing. Yeah. After the war, she's back in- back in Japan, she's no longer traveling with the Pen Corps. She and Monma move again. Yoshiya- I couldn't find a lot on this but basically after the war she like- she's still writing- she's still writing these serialized stories but she also develops this like passion for *haiku*. And she studies with this poet and novelist Takahama Kyoshi. Couldn't find any of her- her poetry, I really wish that, you know, I could have seen- seen some of her haiku's. We're gonna talk about this more.

1957, she formally adopts Monma Chiyo so she can be named as her successor. 50s and 60s she's still writing, she starts- you know she's

focusing more on these historical novels, partially just to be like, "Hey shitty, male writers who say that I can't write this pure literature and grounded in reality, screw you." [laughter] 1962, she builds another house in this neighborhood called Kamakura, where she and Chiyo lived until her death. The house is now a museum. It's open what? Like twice a year?

**Erica:** It's yeah there's- like it's open to the public twice a year. So when she died, she set the mu- gave the museum to Kamakura to become a resource center for women. And so they opened it to the public and I was very, very, very lucky a few years ago to be able to go and see it.

**Leigh:** They've like preserved her like study. Where she used to write.

**Erica:** Yeah her study and her living room, you can't get into the bedrooms, but like the main parts of the house-

**Leigh:** Darn.

**Erica:** And it's a beautiful house and it's- you could really imagine just the two of them sitting there, opening the *shoji* and just looking out on their beautiful garden and just sitting there sipping their tea and just being like yeah this is really lovely [laughs gently] you know just-

**Leigh:** This is the life.

**Erica:** Being happy together you know.

**Leigh:** Yeah. So they're, you know, they're living happily, they're basically just enjoying good, older age. Yoshiya's health declines shortly after the move. She'd had like gastrointestinal problems for years that she hadn't really looked into really extensively. She is diagnosed with metastatic colon cancer in May 1972. And I read something, but I couldn't find much more about it that I guess Monma Chiyo kind of kept that diagnosis from her?

**Erica:** Yes. Didn't tell her. That's actually not entirely unknown at the time, there was a- for a very long time, Japanese doctors would not tell the patient, they'd only tell the family.

**Leigh:** Yeah.

**Erica:** So it is very possible that the doctor simply- that they just didn't tell her anything don't want you to- don't want you to get upset.

**Leigh:** Right. And so you know yeah and Chiyo is like, "I don't want to tell you that you're gonna die."

**Erica:** I mean they can't really do anything about it so...

**Leigh:** Yeah . Can't do anything about it. But she knew you know based on her will and you know what she was leaving to- you know. So she dies a year after getting diagnosed- a little- little more than a year. So she passed away July 11th, 1973 at the age of 77.

### **Why Do We Think They're Gay?: Some More Socio-Historical Context**

All right so, you know you might have a few guesses about why we're talking about this person, but why do we think they're gay?

**Erica:** [sarcasm] I don't know who's- so hard to tell!

**Leigh:** Hmm. Well before we get into like actually, "Hey, Yoshiya is living with a woman for 50 years," [laughs] let's talk a little bit about the influence of Western literature and sexology on Japan and what is happening in terms of, "Oh hey sometimes women want to have sexy times-

**Leigh and Erica:** With other women."

**Leigh:** You have these these works of Western psychologists, you know our [sarcasm] good old buddies Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, all these are translated into Japanese and you have a huge cadre of Japanese sexologists popping up and basically becoming 'authorities' I use that you know scare quotes.

**Erica:** 'Authorities,' right. Yeah.



**Leigh:** Writing on issues of sexuality and same sex love and I- I'm gonna say lesbianism even though like lesbian is not a word that was used in Japan until the 1970s. You have this kind of say this visibility of this, suddenly the social imagination is like, "Huh? What? Lesbian's exist?!"

**Erica:** Yeah.

### **Content Note: discussion of pathologizing of homosexuality**

**Leigh:** And you know like I was saying before like sexology writing was everywhere it was in both academic spaces and mainstream spaces. *Seito* published the first Japanese translation of Ellis's studies in the psychology of sex, specifically sexual inversion in women. And what's really important at this time is that, 1910s 1920s, we have the creation or the kind of restructuring of specific terms describing female same-sex love, separating it out from male/male love. Previously you had this word, *doseiai*, which was used for both men and women

**Erica:** And it still is.

**Leigh:** And it still is.

**Erica:** It is essentially the equivalent of homosexuality.

**Leigh:** Yes. Yeah. It's- literally just means like same love.

**Erica:** *Dosei* is same sex, like same gender I guess. And then *ai* is in this case one of the two forms of love and it's the one that we would use for romantic love.

**Leigh:** And you have this moral dichotomy, created by sexologists at this time. And we've seen this in other places too. They create these like two sub categories of *doseiai* right? This *ome* and *esu*.

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** So they have this *esu* or S class, which we're going to talk about very shortly, is this pure chaste romantic friendships, loving your friend.

**Erica:** Romantic- Platonic romance.

**Leigh:** Platonic romance. Practicing for marriage.

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** It's part of natural development you know? We've- we've talked about this multiple times. If you and your gal pal want to love each other, it's all A-okay as long as you're just preparing for marriage.

**Erica:** Right. Exactly.

**Leigh:** Right?

**Erica:** But this is the- this is the crime, until very recently, the crime of lesbianism was having identity. Right?

**Leigh:** Yes.

**Erica:** The moment you say, "I want to have a relationship with this other person. I am gay. They are gay. Me and this other person are going to live together as a couple. We are family." People freak out.

**Leigh:** Yeah. So you have this- this other category that sexologists created called *ome* which is basically butch/femme-

**Erica:** Butch/femme.

**Leigh:** Butch/femme dynamics. It was- it was woman-husband and woman-wife. Right? This stereotype of this masculine woman, possessive and controlling the other woman and it's basically-

**Erica:** Which is a real tell about how they think about how men are. Right?

**Leigh:** Which is a real tell.

**Erica:** Like talk about telling on themselves.

**Leigh:** [laughs] Yeah. It's this- I mean we see this over and over as soon as somebody quote unquote "imitating a man-"

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** Threatening the patriarchy, saying, "Ah I'm introducing a phallus into this situation," it becomes threatening.

**Erica:** It becomes [unintelligible]

**Leigh:** So it's- it's where you have this other type of relationship as a natural part of development, you have this which is degeneracy and inversion and deviance.

**Erica:** Which is really funny because when *yuri* was getting really popular in the 1990s, Americans did this to *yuri*. They were like, "Well there's *shōjoai* which is really sweet and pure and there's *yuri* which is like sex for guys. It's porn."

**Leigh:** Ahh.

**Erica:** And I was like, That's- nobody thinks- Why would you do that? Like why would you [laughter] as a fan insist on a moral code for this?" And yet they did it all over again. Right?

**Leigh:** Right.

**Erica:** Like it's just- it's like this it's almost- people can't stop themselves like...

**Leigh:** Right. Yeah. And we- we have some some translated language here so there's this from *Fujo Shinbun* which is *Women's Newspaper*:

*"As a result of our studies, we can say that there are two kinds of same-sex love. One is a pure, yet passionate form of friendship, whereas the other is the so-called ome relationship..."*

**Erica:** So called.

**Leigh:** *which is a kind of female husband-and-wife couple....The former...there is nothing in this relationship that is shameful or despicable. But as for the latter ome relationship, this is truly a strange phenomenon....and it is probably a phenomenon of disease."*

So you can see this- this language-

**Erica:** The pathologizing of lesbianism is, at this time- period of time of course everybody is familiar with how Freud pathologized his own daughter even.

**Leigh:** Yeah.

**Erica:** Who is very gay.

**Leigh:** Yeah and there's [giggles] just like in some spaces, you know, you see these like supposed misfortunes or worries is you know-

**Erica:** See them all the time.

**Leigh:** If- if women have sex with other women, so many things will happen to your body. If you upset the masculine/feminine roles you know you're gonna have vaginal cramps, frigidity, withering of the genitals.

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** You're gonna want to commit suicide. You're gonna be a criminal. Like nothing new.

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** It's like so far as to quote-unquote "experts," would like draw up, and publish them in these magazines, these checklists for like parents and teachers to be like all right, cool.

**Erica:** "Do your children"...Yeah.

**Leigh:** Yeah. "Do you know where your children are? Are they gal paling or are they sexy timing?"

**Erica:** Yeah. [laughs]

**Leigh:** Like they read like, do you remember when teenagers were wearing like silly bands or whatever?

**Erica:** Yeah. Yep. Yeah.

**Leigh:** Like slap bracelets?

**Erica:** It was a bit after my time.

**Leigh:** And they were like, "Oh god! If they wear this- if they wear this color that means they're having sex!" It was literally like that.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Leigh:** You have- like I read where there was you know some checklist for some guys it was like, "All right if the two girls are wearing their hair in similar styles they like each other. And if one of them is wearing a bob, they're definitely fucking."

**Erica:** [laughs] And it's always the same right? Isn't it just crazy? It's always the same things over and over and over.

**Leigh:** Yeah. It's wild. More on like, you know if you want to read more on kind of this like pathologizing of lesbianism we've got a really great article that we'll put in the show notes '*S' is for Sister: Schoolgirl Intimacy and Same-Sex Love in Early Twentieth Century Japan* by Gregory Pflugfelder

**Erica:** It's excellent.

**Leigh:** It's really great.

**Erica:** And there's really great quote from that one it's- cause he was talking about the 'authorities.' You know people who were deciding what was pathological and what wasn't he- he quotes, the quote reads:

*"Antifeminists rarely hesitated to claim this diagnostic privilege, even when they were not themselves doctors."*

And I wanted to go bing, bing, bing. Oh like that- yes!

### **Content Note: discussion of suicides in the news at the time**

**Leigh:** Right. Yeah. You you also have at this time, right like everybody's freaking out about this stuff, partially also because- I mean you know we're skipping a little forward- but you know 1930s you get this- what seems to be, because of the media attention, this like rash of like female love double suicides. To be clear this was also happening cross gender. People were just- [laughter] People were just- people were just feeling the immense pressure in a pre-war Japanese society and very, very rigid roles and arranged marriages and all of this.

But you have this- this one notoriously publicized incident in 1935 of this like suicide attempt by this theater performer Saio Eriko and the woman that she was in a relationship with, Masuda Fumiko, who was the daughter of this like wealthy Kyoto family. And it basically just- it catapulted everybody to talking about this.

**Erica:** Yes.

**Leigh:** And- and they were ridiculed in the press and it is a whole thing. One- one fucking [laughs] sexologist writes like:

*"Why are there so many lesbian double suicides reported in the society column of the daily newspapers? One can only infer that females these days are monopolizing homosexuality."*

**Erica:** And there's you know [laughter] the thing is this is the same kind of charge of being degenerate that you're seeing a lot. It's being leveled at *shōjo*, of course, because the *shōjo* is degenerate because she's so influencible. And flappers here in the U.S., modern girls which would be older, maybe college age women who had traveled the world and come back and found their husbands were boring, provincial and dull and didn't want to get married now. And so you know they want they want to see the world and be part of the world and they're being told, "No stay home."

You get this this charge of deviancy and degeneracy associated with it and so a lot of this I mean a lot of the the double suicide thing was very much a a media freak out. I remember, maybe it was the 90s, when gals and Shibuya were really hot? It was- the particularly the gals, they were putting like heavy makeup on. And they were almost girl gangy? But they weren't gangs! They were just groups of girls, right? But they were like, "Oh these dangerous, degenerate girls." And mostly they just hung out like eating McDonald's and going shopping for, you know, jewelry and I like- they weren't doing anything. What roving bands of girls with heavy makeup on, that were doing, like they would steal-

**Leigh:** Like *Clockwork Orange*?

**Erica:** You know? They, you know, they were just simply being. They were finding a space for themselves but the media kept reporting on them as being very degenerate and very deviant.

**Leigh:** Yeah. And you have this- you have a lot of these kind of things leveled at Yoshiya Nobuko herself.

**Erica:** Of course.

**Leigh:** People called her *garçon* which was a word that was used in- like you were saying flapper *moga* was- was another one.

**Erica:** *Moga* was actually a very fashionable thing. But of course the media would constantly blow it up. And that really is what it comes down to. It's always that the media is going, "Girls? what are they for if not us?" [agreeing noises] And then they get very confused when girls are not for them.

**Leigh:** Right. And girls were doing their own thing.

**Erica:** Yeah.

### **Word of The Week: "S Class"**

**Leigh:** Which leads us to our word of the week.

♪ Word of the Week. Gay word of history! ♪

So our word of the week is *esu* or S-Class or Class S or S.

**Erica:** Or S! Right.

**Leigh:** This- this [laughs] amorphous thing, that nobody can really quite define except for the girls-

**Erica:** Everybody knows what it is but nobody can say it comes from here.

**Leigh:** Yeah. So despite sexologists pathologizing queerness, schoolgirls, all over it, you know we talked about the way that these girls' culture and these girls magazines really focused on, you know, these intimate and admiring relationships between these younger schoolgirls and these older schoolgirls and while you know sexologists are like lumping queer men and queer women together. Students are like seeing their lives as completely different because you know we're sex segregated in schools. And they have separate vocabularies to describe these relationships with their friends with their- their crushes essentially.

**Erica:** Their intimate friends.



**Leigh:** Yes. Their intimate friends. You have this 1911 article in the *Fujin Koron* newspaper which claimed that between seven and eight out of ten women had experienced these same-sex relationships between classmates. And at this time you know early 1900s, 1910s you have like different words. They're all very localized to different schools you have passionate love, *netsuai*, or *goshin'yu* or intimate friends or *ohaikara*.

**Erica:** And the thing is *goshin'yu* is still a word used. *Shin'yu* is just like best- not that's a really weirdly formal version but *shin'yu* is a word is like-like, "You're my best bud like you're my-" you're the person with my back is your *shin'yu*.

**Leigh:** Ahh.

**Erica:** So these aren't words that don't exist outside these situations, but yes of course there's- every school develops its own vocabulary. Every group develops some vocabulary. It's absolutely 100% true. If you were a teenage girl, those of you listening, if any of you are teenage girls I bet you immediately remember the group you called- the name you called your group of friends [agreeing noises] and- and how you had your own entirely personal vocabulary. And if you know anything about language you know that in many cases, those words are created by you so that no one else knows what you're talking about. It's code to keep the outsiders out.

**Leigh:** Yeah. We see these relationships flourishing in these sex segregated spaces, the same kind of things are happening in these girl schools as you're seeing in like convents and you're seeing in factories. And you're seeing these places where it's women being allowed to flourish together.

**Erica:** Yes.

**Leigh:** Pflugfelder mentions

*"The above expressions [so all of these you know different disparate words] all manifested the power of school girls to define themselves in their cohorts in their own terms, a power that adults preferred to keep in their own hands."*

Right?

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** Is like you were saying this- this code. By the 20s and 30s though, you get kind of this proliferation of this term, S, that starts making its way through all of these other schools across the country. And it's spread through these magazines.

**Erica:** Yes, absolutely.

**Leigh:** So you have this- this adoption of this term through- well this is- this is what we're observing around the country, and we're gonna define it in this way and cement it in this literature space.

**Erica:** Right, exactly. The- the- giving that space, ceding that space to girls to define for themselves you know. And then you as a- a girl, not in a city reading like, "Oh wow there's this S culture you know this is for me this is for me and my friends." Right? So S also developed a artistic aesthetic and to be very, very, very simple about it, it's girl centered and it's about the varying modes of being *shōjo*.

**Leigh:** And- and I- I want to make it clear too, like this is happening in the culture and in the literature and also it's like actually just happening. It is everywhere in these girls' schools and honestly, Yoshiya Nobuko becomes a huge part of transforming that into an entire subculture. Because it's being disseminated and distributed through the country this way, through these- through these magazines.

**Erica:** Absolutely.

**Leigh:** It starts becoming this huge, public concept; this hugely public understanding. So that, like you were saying, these factory workers, these lower class girls who did not have the luxury of being in this liminal adolescent space, still were aware of it and still saw that as something that is an option.

**Erica:** And- and something to aspire to.

**Leigh:** Exactly.

**Erica:** This idea that even though you're not at a fancy French, you know, foreign run, private school that maybe there's somebody who can be your bigger sister here in- in your local area and and just you can develop intimacy with them. And really-

**Leigh:** Maybe kiss your friends!

**Erica:** Yeah, you could.

**Leigh:** Maybe kiss your friends.

**Erica:** Maybe kiss your friends. Sure. Why not?

**Leigh:** Yeah, yeah. Usually these stories were depicted like you were saying classmates with like an age difference and yeah, we don't really know what S stands for: sister, *shōjo*, sex, *schon*, German word for beautiful, escape, nobody really knows. But adults saw as a threat.

**Erica:** What a surprise! Adult saw something that girls liked as a threat.

**Leigh:** [sarcasm] What a surprise!

**Erica:** [sarcasm] That has never happened in the history of the world.

**Leigh:** [laughs] [sarcasm] No not at all. Everyone's incredibly respected. [laughter] Class S literature was like officially banned, in 1936, by the Japanese government because of these threats and because of this you know, "Oh god these Class S relationships are getting too- too intense and too hot and heavy and it's gonna turn them into *ome* relationships!" Girls' schools were even like forbidding exchanging these letters among S lovers. The media basically shut this down because you know it was so pervasive that like, "But what if it leaves the schools?"

**Erica:** But you know what the funny thing is? They try. They certainly got- the media got hysterical and everybody tried to but you know what? Well into the 70s and 80s girls were still exchanging you know diaries, they probably- probably the little kids still do and writing little messages to each other. It doesn't- none of that goes away I mean you can make a law that says there's no way to do this you must never do this, and then the average 11 year old doesn't know about the law, and doesn't care. [laughs] It's going to do whatever the fuck they feel like.

**Leigh:** An 11 year old who's incredibly well versed in like, [laughs] in a social engineering-

**Erica:** Right, social engineering. And you know they really care very much that the government doesn't want them to do a exchange diary with their best friend, which they absolutely are doing.

**Leigh:** Absolutely are still doing. Yeah. I mean all of this basically boils down just- yeah male and adult control over these spaces where women and girls have this new form of autonomy. And since these like relationships were the domain of these girls themselves like we can't really use writings by adults and outsiders in media to like gauge the reception of these relationships within their own environments. Pflugfelder has a really lovely quote that I thought hit the nail on the head, is:

*"The discourses of outsiders can never fully capture the meanings that S held for its participants"*

And that's apparent in the fact that like, he interviews former schoolgirls in- for this article and you know he tries to talk to them about their memories of their S relationships versus like this stigma and negative associations. And they see a complete disconnect.

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** There's this like gap in their understanding of that.

**Erica:** Yep.

**Leigh:** So you can only be held you know and fully understood by the people who were involved in it. Which aren't the people writing these things.

**Erica:** But on the other hand I mean it lasted so long and I mean people that I know, people that I have worked with in recent years, have told me they went to a girls' school and they had *onee-sama* and *imoto* relationships and S was still a word that was used, and it was all perfectly well understood even now. The thing about S is it can be as simple as you joined a club and one of the older girls helps you out and becomes like your close confidant or you have your best bud in school or something, but it can be more intimate, but the intimacy that develops between girls makes adults, and particularly adult men, fearful.

**Leigh:** Yeah.

**Erica:** And that's that's really what we're talking about it it doesn't have to be defined.

♪ Word of the Week. Gay word of history! ♪

[Ad break]

### **Why Do We Think They're Gay?: Yoshiya's Life**

All right, so back to Yoshiya. Speaking of feeling frustrated over men and their interpretation of these things, Yoshiya had some attitude about marriage and men, I didn't really know exactly where to put this in here but I had to put it in here is, she wrote an article in 1931, basically just called *A Husband is Unnecessary*.

**Erica:** Right. Because people are saying, "Oh poor her," you know? She must be so lonely.

**Leigh:** She must be so lonely. Don't you want a man around? Wouldn't it be so much easier if blah blah blah blah blah... And she writes:

*"Rest assured I'm not at all lonely. The outdated notion that an unmarried woman is lonely, bitter and angry is completely foreign to me. I write novels which for me is the great work of my life,"*

Completely ignoring the fact that she's got Monma Chiyo-

**Erica:** Right! Hello?

**Leigh:** *"For some reason the omniscient Kami made me a novelist instead of a wife."*

She also then goes on to say:

*"If the Kami had given me a choice between having a husband and becoming a novelist, I'd choose novelist."*

Gay.

**Erica:** Yeah totally gay. [laughter] I mean yeah- I mean at the time of course the joke and I'm sure Monma and her laughed hysterically because she had a wife of her own.

**Leigh:** Yeah.

**Erica:** She didn't have a husband, she had a wife you know.

**Leigh:** She was a wife. She was a wife and she had a wife.

**Erica:** Sure, she had a hot wife.

**Leigh:** Yeah. Yeah. She- there's this letter to Monma earlier in her career, we mentioned how like a lot of male writers were like you're not serious literature, we don't care about you. She admonishes these like chauvinist writers. She like writes to Monma, really frustrated she's like:

*"Almost to the point of endorsing obscenity, they push on girls the idea that they should be flirting with men...I will do battle with them face-to-face shouting 'begone you demons' and exorcise them from our midst"*

**Erica:** That would be- that would have been great.

**Leigh:** If only! God. All right, time to dive into some lady loving with Yoshiya. Do you want to talk a little bit about Kikuchi?

**Erica:** Sure. So Kikuchi Yukie was Yoshiya Nobuko's roommate at the YWCA.

**Leigh:** Oh my god, they were roommates.

**Erica:** And their relationship was contentious. They had different love languages. [laughs]

**Leigh:** To put it lightly.

**Erica:** To put it lightly. Kikuchi was known as an aggressive and jealous person and partner. There's a diary entry from January 25th, 1920:

*"SEX [sic] is a most natural human desire. But the irritating thing about Yukie is the way she equates sex with possession and ownership, the way men do. The physical act is just a cover for a coarseness of spirit"*

And Yoshiya's writing, she was very, especially in her writings her letters to Monma Chiyo, clearly they were- had a sexual relationship and they both thought it was really an act of beauty and an act of love. And so for Kikuchi to be this way, it was not really her, what Yoshiya was looking for in a relationship and Kikuchi made her thoughts known in letters to Yoshiya about a character from *Yaneura no Nishojo* being based off her. And also her general thoughts on you she is queer in she says:

*"In Yaneura no Nishojo", you are described well but I am described as if Akitsu [is] just a doll dressed up beautifully for you"*

*"I hate novelists. I hate you, too...I wonder if art really has power to heal human solitude and deep pain [correction: pain, deep] inside the mind? Please forget about being a novelist...I am so lonely."*

**Leigh:** [laughs] I just really love it. She's like, "I mean your depiction of yourself is great but you just made me like a playtoy."

**Erica:** And you know to some extent she's not entirely wrong-

**Leigh:** Right.

**Erica:** Because Akiko as a character is fully undeveloped when she shows up and doesn't really see Akitsu as a human. Because she doesn't see anybody else as a human she doesn't really see herself as a human. Everybody's sort of a plaything or a figure on the wall. You know? It's very- it's a very Plato's cave kind of thing.

So when Yoshiya breaks up with Kikuchi in 1920, she became briefly involved with an older woman at the YWCA and that all- that relationship- also does not end all that well. She becomes disillusioned. She becomes disillusioned. And is talking to a friend about how close friendship between women is impossible, but then me and friend introduces her to Monma Chiyo who is three years younger than her and she was a mathematics teacher.

**Leigh:** Yeah. She's this- this mathematics teacher in a higher girls' school in Kojimachi district. She comes from like a different kind of family background.

**Erica:** Yeah. Totally different class, everything.

**Leigh:** Totally different class. Her parents were really, really supportive of her scholarly pursuits and her education and- and so they have this kind of different family background. Monma Chiyo's first impression of Yoshiya was basically saying like, "Oh I really like her cute haircut." They become inseparable.

**Erica:** Yep.

**Leigh:** Really quickly. Talk about U-Hauling.

**Erica:** Yeah like right away. Practically.



**Leigh:** Right away. They're like, every day they're meeting after you know Monma Chiyo's like done with work. They're either like hanging out in her house or like, "Let's go to the book stores. Let's go book shopping together." So you know being attached to the hip they get really, really tight and then Monma Chiyo takes a job teaching at a faraway school and they're separated for 10 months and in this time-

**Erica:** So they start writing letters.

**Leigh:** In this time they send over 150 letters to each other. Like five to ten page letters too, some of these. Like one of the shortest ones is just this lovely little- it's like a little poem from Nobuko. It's from 1920, it says 1923 so it's like 1923, 1924 this is- this is happening.

*Beloved Chiyo*

*I will love you no matter what*

*I do not wish to make you lonely*

*Nor do I want to be lonely*

*I want you to be the source of my strength*

*And, if you will let me, I would like to be the source of your strength*

*May 23, 8:30 pm*

*Arriving home soaking wet from the rain*

*Nobuko*

**Erica:** Again, just reminding your audience that even within my lifetime, letters is how we actually did this. [laughs]

**Leigh:** Yeah. [laughs]

**Erica:** We didn't have phones or text or snapchat. This is- we didn't tweet each other, we didn't DM each other. We actually wrote letters when I was in college I used to sit in back, boring classes writing very long letters that sound extraordinarily like this to my wife. So that- that is how we did it once upon a time.

**Leigh:** That's gay.

**Erica:** Yeah it's totally gay. Let me- can I read the next one?

**Leigh:** Absolutely.

**Erica:** All right. So in 1923, Monma wrote to Yoshiya:

*"I am unspeakably lonely when you leave....As I wrap my unlined black kimono around my bare skin [Oh, come on, gay] and adjust the hem, my body aroused by feelings of longing [for you]...If only on this night we were together in our own little house, lying quietly under the light of a lantern, then my heart would gradually warm and neither would you be so sad."*

**Leigh:** I love that she's like, "Hey babe I'm super lonely when you leave, also want to know what I'm wearing?"

**Erica:** Yeah. Right. I'm just adjusting my kimono.

**Leigh:** Just adjusting my sexy, black kimono.

**Erica:** Sexy black kimono.

**Leigh:** Feeling aroused.

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** [laughs] You have this 1924 letter from Yoshiya to Monma that is very steamy-

**Erica:** Oh, yeah.

**Leigh:** For a woman who's not writing a lot about sex in her published writings.

*"I crave your lips. Do you know how much I crave them? When I get into bed alone at night I begin to burn deeply for you...I am staking my entire life on you, on a woman--every prayer, every desire, every happiness, even my art. I need you and you alone; I have no life without you."*

**Erica:** Lovely.

**Leigh:** Oh my god. Yeah. And like you could tell they're like so in love with each other. As early as 1925, they're both expressing their frustration in these letters to each other. Basically being like, "Duh society's double standard, what the fuck? Why can't we live together and be married?" Monma writes:

*"I can only think of how soon we can arrange to live together. There's nothing I need more than your warm embrace. It is unfortunate that we are not a male and female couple, for if you were a male, our union would be quickly arranged. But a female couple is not allowed."*

She also says like, "I don't get it there's so many fucked up things about heterosexual relationships." Yep.

**Erica:** [laughs] And- and Yoshiya responds that she would- wants to build a house for them. She'll declare it a branch household which is- has to do with the way names- family names are registered. So she would be a branch household of her family making her head of household, and then therefore independent. She'll adopt Monma, which she does eventually. And so she can be legally part of the household and she says at that point she's gonna want a wedding ceremony to celebrate.

**Leigh:** Yeah. She's like, "Oh we'll invite our friends, the person who introduced us." She's like laying this out very practically.

**Erica:** Yes.

**Leigh:** She's like, "All right one: I'm gonna build this house. Two: we're gonna do this. Three: I'm gonna adopt you. Four: We'll have a wedding ceremony. We'll tell everybody that is an adoption ceremony but it's a wedding ceremony."

**Erica:** Really.

**Leigh:** And she's like, "I wonder what kind of wedding kimono would look best on you?"

**Erica:** Yes.

**Leigh:** Maybe bring back that black kimono? [laughs] Yeah. Monma like agrees to quit her teaching position and you know stay around so that she doesn't have to like travel far away for work. They basically had that 10 months apart they're like never again! And she becomes Yoshiya's secretary in 1931. So she does all of the admin for Yoshiya. She's like editing her writing. They're working together really closely and this was a nice- you know even though she never really hit it, this was like the nice public front of like, "hey-

**Erica:** It's a writer and secretary.

**Leigh:** "Ah, yes, we're writer and secretary, business partners." And Yoshiya kept her promise to build that house. And she- she said that she was gonna adopt Monma and she didn't in- in you know the 1920s, kind of two reasons you know. Monma's parents were like, "Absolutely not," at first. And also like Yoshiya wanted to wait until she could actually legally marry her in that same letter she's like, "And you know all adopt you and in the meantime we'll get- I'll work on getting the law reformed." Like, no big deal.

**Erica:** I mean she like really believe that she could do that too. She worked really hard. That was one of the reasons she joined the *Pen Butai* too. It was- she really believe that if she was working within the system that she could change the system.

**Leigh:** So you know the war happens. And it becomes pretty obvious after the war that it's not gonna happen. That "We're- we're not gonna be able to legally marry in my lifetime so damn it, let's do it." So she officially adopts Monma in 1957 and we've seen this with some other relationships, Bayard Rustin did this with his partner. This is the only way that you can get some sort of legal recognition of your relationship. Ensure that you know your belongings go to your- your loved one when you die, all of this.

**Erica:** Which is still causing, apparently, contention in the family.

**Leigh:** Yeah?

**Erica:** Yeah, yeah.

**Leigh:** Wow. Yeah you said that that Sarah Frederick has been talking with-

**Erica:** With the family members.

**Leigh:** With family members.

**Erica:** But to try to make sure that- that the estate is handled the way the family wants it to be handled and- and- and apparently- yeah. I mean it always comes down to that right? You know who- who- who inherits the money is always the biggest question.

**Leigh:** Right. Yeah. And you know they live together. Yoshiya is writing, she's editing her stuff they have a lovely older- older years, just relaxing in their beautiful home together until Yoshiya passes away and according to at least one or two sources that I found, Yoshiya supposedly died holding Monma's hand.

**Erica:** Nice.

### **Queer Themes in Yoshiya's Fiction**

**Leigh:** Mer. All right. So we talked about Yoshiya's life and queerness in her life. Let's talk about the juicy gay stuff in her writing. So the- these like general themes of her writing, it's always focused on women.

**Erica:** I suppose it is.

**Leigh:** Yeah. There's this this great quote from Miho Matsugu which is:

*"Women were the eternal goal of her literature and her life."*

**Erica:** I love that quote.

**Leigh:** Yeah.

**Erica:** That should be on a grave stone, you know. That's- that's so outstanding. [laughter] Maybe I'll put it on mine.

**Leigh:** There you go. [laughs] So like in her stories, romantic friendship is- is this unparalleled love that kind of encapsulates and defines this unique space, this liminal space of girlhood. And it's separate from the outside world. So we have this fantasy world, you know, as this special- special place for us is where we can kind of foster this love. Yoshiya's own words, she describes girls' love, describes *shōjo*, as quote:

*"extremely positive in terms of educational value, and its worth immeasurable"*

She says it's a necessary step for girls to quote:

*"develop love...as a valuable foundation on which to build one's character"*

**Erica:** Nice.

**Leigh:** She also was really frustrated with all of the quote unquote "experts" and sexologists being like, "Uh we're adults we know what's best for these girls."

**Erica:** Yes.

**Leigh:** And she's saying, "No, this shit you're talking about is gonna make girls" quote:

*"doubt the purity of their love, killing the gentle and beautiful natures of girls which were granted by God"*

**Erica:** Beautiful

**Leigh:** Then she was- you know she insists there's nothing shameful about loving somebody or being loved by somebody. Which is really just, that- it's there, that's there, that's it yeah.

**Erica:** That's lovely. Yep.

**Leigh:** We have some quotes from *Hana Monogatari* that we thought would be really fun to like pull out. Do you want to talk a little bit about *Yellow Rose*?

**Erica:** I'll talk about *Yellow Rose*. In one scene, we have- the thing is, it's a student who graduates. So she is a teacher, she becomes a teacher. So she is literally one year older or two years older than the girl that- the other girl in the story. Because she graduates at 18 now she's- but so a few months later now she's a teacher so I want to make that very clear that she's not very adult. She's like maybe 18, 19 years old. So Miss Katsuragi and her student, Reiko, who meet on the train. In one scene, Miss Katsuragi tells Reiko about admiration of Sappho:

*"Miss Reiko, Sappho was a person who gave her passionate devotion to a beautiful friend of the same sex and was betrayed...Sappho, the tragic female poet--I, I love her--"*

It's just- it's an incredible story. I really do suggest you read *Yellow Rose*.

**Leigh:** And one of the things we can't really express in audio form is the stylization in these stories. Right? There's a lot of literature on these stories, about how. the way that it stylized, using ellipses and dashes and pauses, is creating this yearning which is very Sappho- very Sapphic. This idea of pauses is this kind of missing things in between.

**Erica:** And things that can't be said. Things that are left unsaid, is- is also very typical in a lot of Japanese stories. That dot, dot, dot can say so much. It's like, it's that unspoken tension.

**Leigh:** Yeah. That stylization suggests that those two female characters, when they're talking about Sappho, they're actually talking about their love

for one another. But it's existing in that space of the things that we're not actually saying.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Leigh:** There's another- another one- another story in this series, *Shaded Flower*, that has [laughs] this really great quote is:

*"Two girls learned the sweet taste of forbidden fruits--How can they go back to their old days?...."*

This one I feel like is the gayest so far.

*"They were wearing a beautiful pink veil called 'secret'...'we are...flowers in shade...'  
says Tamaki hesitantly, when Masuko puts her arm around Tamaki's shoulder...Masuko answers, 'Yes, we are shaded flowers...We only bloom under blue moon light..."*

I love it. And you have these tragic endings that happen a lot in Yoshiya's works, especially in *Hana Monogatari*.

### **Content Note: brief reference to suicide**

**Erica:** Yeah. There's a lot of tragic endings in there. But in a lot of ways it's- it's in response to the lack of choice the girls are given. You know? So if we're talking about, that girls are given literally one path, there's one path. [sound of hands slapping together] And that path is to become a good wife, wise mother and sacrifice for the family and then die. And that's the only option given for girls, there is no other option. So it's really a rejection. So there's a quote here from Suzuki that the tragic endings and the choices are seen as rejection of demands to mature into *ryosai kenbo*. Characters:

*"refusing to move on to heterosexuality"*

*"They are in a continuous state of mourning for the loss of the same-sex world"*



You know?

**Leigh:** Yeah. There's a lot of stories of them just being like, "But I don't wanna- I don't wanna leave this- this space."

**Erica:** World.

**Leigh:** "I don't want to leave this world."

**Erica:** "I don't want to leave this world."

**Leigh:** Yeah. Well and that's- but you know influenced these double suicides.

**Erica:** Right these are your two options. Your choices are basically death or marriage then death. Like you didn't really have a whole lot of wiggle room.

**Leigh:** Which is why it's so remarkable that we have Yoshiya being able to live with a woman for 50 years.

**Erica:** Yep.

**Leigh:** Be financially independent.

**Erica:** Yep.

**Leigh:** And breaking this mold. Which is what made her...

**Erica:** Infamous.

**Leigh:** And- infamous and also you know, other women who did not have the financial privilege that she had, to be able to do that, looked upon by the media and this- this outside world as threats and as degenerates.

**Erica:** Yes.

**Leigh:** Then for *Two Maidens in an Attic*.

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** 1919. Again you know this is semi-autobiographical in that she's basing this a lot on her relationship with Kikuchi while at the YWCA, but one of the characters sees the other in the bathroom and it's a very erotically and and romantically charged passage.

**Erica:** I want to talk about this for a second.

*"In the steam...fragments of a human body appeared and disappeared...soft movement of a round body...A beautiful white arm appeared from the steam and reached toward Akiko..It was Akitsu [correction: Tamaki]...She said, "Let's go to the balcony together"*

And another passage then later has them smelling each other's lily magnolia scent. That- when you talk about- when you see an anime for instance and there's a scene where we're seeing somebody in the shower and there's like all that steam wreathed around them, we're still looking at Yoshiya Nobuko's influence.

**Leigh:** I mean there's a good reason why you call it the progenitor of this entire genre.

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** They end up leaving this attic together with the story. Forced to leave this like *shōjo* world behind, but they decide to forge this new path in this- in this new world that there's this this quote:

*"Kissing the wall of the attic, the two virgins finally left the room. In search of their new destiny! In search of the way they should take."*

**Erica:** Yes. A way that- that violates the requirements and the expectations.

**Leigh:** Yeah. And then *Black Rose*, there's this story- a tale of a certain foolish person which features through the whole eight issue run of the magazine. And the reason why I wanted to put

something from this in here is that it's- kind of challenged some of the conventions because it was focusing on like post, higher girls' school love.

And in this Yoshiya really sort of grapples with this pathologization of same-sex love. She uses the word "abnormal" in English, which is really, really significant. One of the characters like identifies as an abnormal female and has shame about her sexuality. She calls it an unnatural passion. But in the same breath is like, "But also I couldn't fall in love with a man that would be even more unnatural." You know? She says:

*"Why am I this way? If I keep this up, I will never be able to return to the true path of nature for as long as I live...Aren't you already 22 years old? How long are you going to keep dreaming strange "abnormal" dreams?"*

And, "abnormal," very important. It's written out in English. So she is directly referencing this sexological language.

**Erica:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Leigh:** But this character- again [laughter] another character named Akiko- isn't depicted as like this stereotype of this threatening like invert. Right? Like this is- this is this 22 year old teacher, she falls in love with a 19 year old student. Basically like, she had this previous relationship with a dorm made in the teacher's school and then had betrayed her sincere passionate love, she reports her to the dorm mistress to protect her rep- It's basically *Lost and Delirious*.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Leigh:** If you've seen that. And because Akiko isn't described as like this like masculine woman. controlling. she's like reluctant to become close to Kazuko to like protect her-

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** From these negative assumptions and I really loved this quote saying, you know. She's trying to imagine kind of like the way the girls do at

the end of *Two Maidens in an Attic*, she's trying to imagine different ways for queerness as- as an option, alongside heterosexuality. she says:

*"There must also be a secondary path; is this not a path that should be allowed for the small number who walk the way of same-sex love?"*

So it's- it's really significant that she's creating this space of like this identity as something that is just innate and positive and not-

**Erica:** And deserves its own path.

**Leigh:** And deserves its own path.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Leigh:** That it's not a decadent or degenerative choice. It- I think it's really important to kind of locate this in the same space as what Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* is doing in the Western world.

**Erica:** Right. Right. Exactly.

**Leigh:** We're in this middle- middle ground where like queerness is becoming recognized as an innate identity and innate set of traits.

**Erica:** Again she is very aware of the outside world, she's not living in a bubble. So she's reading stuff widely and she's talking to people from all over the world as she travels and as they come to Japan as she goes outside of it. So yeah I mean it's- it's- it's not that surprising that she would be firmly aware of other queer writers and their writings you know?

**Leigh:** Yeah. She had so much writing we can't talk about all of it here.

**Erica:** We could not ever get...

**Leigh:** We just wanted to pick a couple of choice gay stuff and also like her older stuff, like after *Two Virgins in an Attic* it really becomes less overtly queer and is really more about like relationships between women who are

choosing not to marry. Like or like sometimes like actual sisterhood but it's all very tinged with this like platonic romantic-

**Erica:** Well she also did a story that had been serialized afterwards that was about women trying to become doctors.

**Leigh:** Yeah.

**Erica:** And that one there was also a very intimate relationship between two of the women and ultimately the one sends the other one away. But the answer is- it's she does add that in within her a more adult work as well, that female intimacy doesn't just disappear from her work.

**Leigh:** Yeah. All right, so let's talk about some of Yoshiya's legacy. You know we know that she was really well received by every girl who could pick up a magazine and read [laughs] during her lifetime but like what are the effects of her life and her work and how was she received at the time and what do we see now?

**Erica:** I think it's very much that she was a drop of water and the ripples have just kept going for all these years and it's just her legacy has not diminished. The quote that I really like is from Sarah Frederick in her article *Not That Innocent: Yoshiya Nobuko's Good Girls*. She's talking about how Yoshiya's magazine sold in the millions. The quote that I just love is:

*"Of course, the sheer number of her readers makes her sociologically important."*

And I just think that it is just a profound statement because these things cannot be overstated. And for someone whose name really didn't get talked about a lot and who a lot of men spent a lot of time, a lot of critics spent a lot of time, trying to sort of just dismisses as, "You know who cares? Its girls' literature." I think her influence has just been so so extensive

**Leigh:** Right. Well and she was in this very specific locus of time.

**Erica:** Yep.

**Leigh:** Where her work and you know some other works of- of people who are writing in this you know girls culture sphere. *Hana Monogatari* made *shōjo* not just- "And here's these couple of years of your life and you're in school and you're having these relationships" but like an entire lifestyle.

**Erica:** And a culture.

**Leigh:** An entire culture.

**Erica:** We kind of didn't really get into it but then her writing was very involved with the new woman movement as well, which was all about women. I- you know- really owning their own identities. Something that could not have happened if *shōjo* culture had existed-

**Leigh:** Right.

**Erica:** For those girls to have grown up to women going, "Oh wait we as women need to be self identified."

### **Pop Culture Tie-Ins**

**Leigh:** Well so I mean before we go into our like how gay were they's in closing it would be silly to not talk about some pop culture tie-ins with somebody who extremely affected pop culture. [laughs]

**Erica:** Yeah. So one of the things that happened in the late 1990s is there was a huge resurgence of Class S so what happened was in the late 1990s there was a series, there was a series of novels called *Maria-sama ga Miteru* means *Maria Watches Over Us*, that's like the Virgin Mary, Maria. And the series was written by a person named Konno Oyuki. The point is in the 1990s there was a humongous resurgence of S because of *Maria-sama ga Miteru*, because it was massively popular. So in the middle of that, there's another series that I think we would be remiss if we don't talk about-

**Leigh:** [laughs] Yes!

**Erica:** Which is called in English, *Revolutionary Girl Utena* and it was a real foundationally *yuri* story for a lot of people and so was *Maria-sama ga Miteru* which was- they were really contemporaneous, the novels. *Revolutionary Girl Utena* is not only deeply, deeply rooted in S, but it's actually deeply rooted in Yoshiya Nobuko's work, like wholeheartedly.

So there's stuff in there that is specific homage to Riyoko Ikeda who did *The Rose of Versailles*, another series that we really didn't mention but you should do a whole episode on. [laughter] If you ever want me back we'll talk about *The Rose of Versailles*.

**Leigh:** Hell, yeah.

**Erica:** And then the thing that I want to point out specifically is at the very end of the movie manga there's a moment where Anthy turns to Utena, who's sitting in a planetarium, and says "*Come with me to the outside world.*" And when I read that, [laughter] I- like the veil fell from my eyes.

**Leigh:** Right.

**Erica:** And I went "Holy shit this is all homage!" Like this is all callbacks to stuff that the Western audience had no idea existed at the time. [agreeing noises] Even things like every time you watch an anime with *shōjo* bubbles or you see a body wreathed in mist you know and like a sexy scene in the shower stuff. Piano duets.

**Leigh:** She had a lot. I mean I picked one out but-

**Erica:** She had a lot of that.

**Leigh:** There were- there were a lot of scenes of watching another girl in the- in the bathroom-

**Erica:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Leigh:** Clouded in steam. You know? I was like, "Oh okay she's got-"

**Erica:** A thing.

**Leigh:** She's got a thing for this.

**Erica:** Yeah, yeah. But you know what? It's also something she could write. That she could write. Right? That's...

**Leigh:** It's- it's like what I say about Sappho. And it's the same thing about Yoshiya. It's all in the yearning.

**Erica:** Yeah. Absolutely!

**Leigh:** As I'm doing the like- the chef's hand.

**Erica:** The chef's hands. It's all in-

**Leigh:** It's all in the yearning.

**Erica:** It is in the yearning. But like in *yuri* you get a lot of weird things that people don't understand. Like, "Why are they always playing a piano duet? I don't get it! Why is there a piano duet? Why?"

**Leigh:** [laughs] Yoshiya!

**Erica:** It's Yoshiya Nobuko.

**Leigh:** Yoshiya.

**Erica:** It's Yoshiya Nobuko. Why are they in a room?

**Leigh:** It's because she loved an attic. She loved a piano scene. She loved to make everything in a Western school.

**Erica:** Right? Putting it in an exotic school.

**Leigh:** Like Western style school.

**Erica:** Putting it in a- putting the two girls in an attic room or very far away from everybody else again.



**Leigh:** Opera.

**Erica:** Yeah, exactly.

**Leigh:** Right.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Leigh:** It's really interesting to see it as kind of like- like a reverse exoticization of you know like just so much of Western cultures is. Anytime you look at Asia, it's just like steeped in like gross orientalism.

**Erica:** Yes.

**Leigh:** And yet you have Japanese girls being like, "Ah! English schools! Pianos!"

**Erica:** "French teacher! My French teacher."

**Leigh:** "French teacher. Attics! Wow! "

**Erica:** Exactly.

**Leigh:** Like it's it's really interesting how that gets kind of flipped on its head and slipped right in.

**Erica:** But i've written about that actually a number of times on- on my blog and in my book. When *yuri* and and boys love came to America, it was very interesting because of course, the Japanese exoticized things by putting them in foreign schools or foreign run schools, foreign organizational run schools.

So now you have Japanese manga coming to America and that in itself is the exotic piece and so you get all these fans going, "I'm going to use these words like *onee-sama*" you know because it's- it's very exotic and the fact is they used English words like "the attic." Right? At the end of *Yaneura no Ni Shoji*, where you know but they're saying goodbye to "the attic" as opposed

to *yaneura* and the whole point is, it's like it was their exotic, special, secret place. Right?

**Leigh:** Yeah. Do you know of any media talking about or representing or- or going into Yoshiya's life itself like I- I mean even just in Japanese, like are there any documentaries or you know has she's shown up as a [laughter] character anywhere? Like...

**Erica:** Yes, yes. Actually, I do know. Well first of all there is a biography of her in Japanese and then you read English language works about her and you'll have that-

**Leigh:** As a source.

**Erica:** Right. As a source. And I have not read it yet. I'm still waiting just for Sarah to do it for me. [laughter] Very lazy person.

**Leigh:** Sarah Frederick, if you're listening to this episode, which I hope you do, we're very excited for when you publish your biography.

**Erica:** Yes, exactly. We can't wait. But there was a manga some years ago and it was so disappointing that it starts with her leaving to go to Tokyo and then completely ignores everything important about her life at all except the writing. And it doesn't talk about her-

**Leigh:** Just ignores Monma?

**Erica:** It doesn't get to that. It doesn't even get to there. She's just she's just a free and easy *moga* walking around Tokyo and doing like fun things and it doesn't talk about her feminist work, doesn't talk about her lit- you know? It talks about her writing. And so they managed to completely strip anything important from her life, except for her writing, and *Hana Monogatari*. And it was super, super disappointing and I think- I think they were embarrassed so it ended pretty quickly. [laughs]

**Leigh:** All right. Good to know. Well maybe we won't recommend that one.

**Erica:** No, I wouldn't. I do not.

**Leigh:** If there's something- if there's something in Japanese that like our listeners who can read Japanese can read, then hell yeah.

**Erica:** Absolutely.

### **How Gay Were They?**

**Leigh:** All right. Well, we're at the end so Erica, I know that we've talked about that- the fact that you have that you have listened to the podcast before so you know what's coming.

**Erica:** I do.

**Leigh:** Is- it is time for our how gay were they ratings. So if you had to rate Yoshiya Nobuko on a random arbitrary number scale of whatever categories and things you would like. How gay was Yoshiya Nobuko?

**Erica:** Yoshiya Nobuko was 100 lilies on a scale from one to ten.

**Leigh:** Excellent. [laughs] I like that. Why lilies? Specifically? As opposed to any of the other 51 flowers From *Hana Monogatari*?

**Erica:** The- the word for *yuri* means lily.

**Leigh:** Oh! that's perfect! Let's see. I think I'm gonna give Yoshiya, you know I'll stick- I'll stay with 100 as well, you know? Just super gay. I mean just the fact that she's, you know amid this society that's like got sexology coming in and being like "no no no no no no no no no" and she's like "cool. I'm gonna sit over here with my butchy haircut and my hot wife of 50 years."

**Erica:** Exactly.

**Leigh:** But I- I think i'll give her a hundred vaguely erotic steam baths [laughter] I think she's appreciate that.

**Erica:** Nice! [clapping] Nice! Excellent.

### **Conclusion and Sign off**

**Leigh:** Well, before we say goodbye, is there anything else that we feel like we need to kind of wrap up our thoughts? I think- I think we've been kinda saying- saying what we need to say all through. We talked about it in our pop culture tie-ins too.

**Erica:** Yep.

**Leigh:** This has been a really fun convo.

**Erica:** It has actually. I can not overstate how important to girls' literature and therefore girls' comics and then therefore *yuri* literature and comics, Yoshiya Nobuko was and is.

**Leigh:** Yeah.

**Erica:** And I wish we had more of her media in English. Just so that Western fandom had a sense of the literary and artistic history of the stuff that they are reading and this is what I do almost all my lecturing and this what's entirely what my book is about.

**Leigh:** And that the very reason why we don't know a lot about her in Western thought was a deliberate erasure of, she was, in her lifetime, received very negatively by male critics, with the power. And being able to cross the gap of getting translated, coming over into like Western canon-

**Erica:** Right.

**Leigh:** Was very dependent on that. It's- it's just a-

**Erica:** It's very much you know, that only men write literary works and that's what- these are the people we translate but- but you know?

**Leigh:** But because it's genre fiction made for girls then, you know? It's like calling Mary Shelley genre fiction.

**Erica:** Exactly. And yet- and yet...

**Leigh:** Mary Shelley did write horror and it was genre fiction and it was era defining.

**Erica:** Yeah. Right!

**Leigh:** And so there you go.

**Erica:** Exactly.

**Leigh:** Also queer.

**Erica:** Also.

**Leigh:** Hmm. Another podcast for another day.

**Erica:** Yeah. [laughs]

**Leigh:** Thank you so much, Erica for hanging out for like three hours.  
[laughs]

**Erica:** It's no problem. I know!

**Leigh:** And talking with me and sharing all of your wonderful expertise and I'm really looking forward to hopefully at some point just getting like a total download from you on what *yuri* I should prioritize.

**Erica:** Oh! Oh! can I- can I just say that- there's an anime [laughter] started today. It's on Crunchyroll called *I'm in Love with the Villainess*. Absolutely-

**Leigh:** [gasps] I saw that manga when I was in Japantown a couple weeks ago.

**Erica:** Well you should- you should totally- well you- first of all everybody should read the manga, everybody should read the novels. Read the novels. Holy shit, read the novels! So it starts off gay but then ends up queer. That's all I'm gonna say.

**Leigh:** Okay.

**Erica:** Really amazing and the anime just started today. Please, please, please go watch it tell Crunchyroll you love it and you want the Blu-ray boxed set with the extras.

**Leigh:** Excellent. Okay. All right, listeners you have a- you have a mission

**Erica:** Okay.

**Leigh:** Well, Erica where can people find out more about you and your work, your writing? What are you doing these days?

**Erica:** Well you can always find me at my blog Okazu, O-K-A-Z-U, Okazu. It's full of my thoughts about various *yuri* anime, manga, and related media that I want you to immediately run out and go watch. I wrote a book called *By Your Side: The First 100 Years of Yuri Anime and Manga*. It has all of my thoughts all about much of what we've talked about and- and how it all went out from there. So I hope everybody will pick that up. It's the first and only book about the history of *yuri* in English.

And you can find me on Twitter for as long as that still exists [laughter] so my [@okazuyuri](#). I'm on Bluesky as [@okazu](#) and on Mastodon as [@EricaFriedman](#) at Mastodon social.

**Leigh:** And I'm Leigh as usual when I'm not nerding out about old timey queer folks or diving into the yearnings [laughter] I'm usually talking about comics, queer TV, various things over at [@aparadoxinflux](#) on Twitter and you know crying about Xena episodes on my couch. *History is Gay* podcast can be found on Tumblr at [@historyisgaypodcast](#), Twitter at [@historyisgaypod](#). You can always drop us a line with questions suggestions or just to say hi at [historyisgaypodcast@gmail.com](mailto:historyisgaypodcast@gmail.com). I love getting messages from folks.

And if you enjoy the show and want to support us in continuing to make it you can support us on our Patreon. As a patron you get access to our super secret Discord server, where we have fun convos, Sappho's Salon mini episodes, where we treat you to love letters and poems from queer historical faves, pop culture tie in live watches, and queer history trivia nights.

As of recording we did one last night it was really, really fun. We had a blast a lot of people showed up and it was just a really lovely time to get to know everybody. You get discounted or free tickets if you're a patron. We have exclusive merch and more. You can become a patron by going to the [support](#) section on our website or just go straight to [patreon.com/HistoryisGay](https://patreon.com/HistoryisGay) and join the ranks of our patron community of lovely queerlings, along with the amazing August

Red, Thea Precht, Ashe Jimmo, Iarrio, or Lario, I could not tell, Makayla Connor, and Heather

Thank you all so much! We couldn't do this without you. You make wonderful things happen in this space. You can get merch at our store click on [shop](#) you know the deal. And lastly, remember to rate, review, and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. It helps more people find the show and we can get more wonderful queerlings into our awesome community. Erica, would you like to help me close out the show?

Erica: Certainly.

Leigh: Alright. That's it for *History is Gay*. Until next time-

Erica: Stay queer.

Leigh: And stay curious.

♪ Outro Music ♪

{100:46}